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SUBJECT: Copper diggers back at Gecamines concession after deadly clash with police

¶1. (SBU) The situation in the Katanga mining center of Likasi, where police March 6 fired on a group of illegal copper miners protesting their expulsion from a nearby parastatal concession, has returned to normal, a MONUC analyst told us March 20. Local officials have permitted diggers to return to the site, and there have been no reports of further incidents during the past two weeks. Governor Moise Katumbi, who had earlier promised the diggers they would not be expelled, has moved to open an investigation into the death of a minor shot by police during the demonstration.

¶2. (SBU) The incident reportedly originated in a request by the copper and cobalt parastatal Gecamines for the police to clear illegal miners from its Kamatanda quarry near Likasi. On March 6, a group of several hundred of these diggers demonstrated in Likasi to protest their expulsion and proclaim their right to dig for copper there. Police and demonstrators clashed, resulting in the shooting death of a boy as well as 32 people wounded, according to press reports.

¶3. (SBU) On March 7, a meeting called by Katumbi with provincial deputies from Likasi and representatives of the diggers agreed to open an investigation into the incident and permit the diggers to return to the site. The MONUC analyst told us there have since been no further incidents. The police officer who accused of shooting the boy is reportedly in custody.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Approximately 150,000 "artisanal" miners scavenge illegally for ore at inactive or undeveloped Katanga mining concessions, earning perhaps two to three dollars a day from selling their pickings to local intermediaries. Gecamines has given no reason for the expulsion, although press reports speculate about possible connections to transfer of concessions to Chinese interests. MONUC is continuing to monitor the situation and does not rule out a future attempt to move the diggers to another location. End comment.

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